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Will Thawing Japan-South Korea Relations Change the Security Landscape of Northeast Asia?

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SYNOPSIS

*Amidst rising tensions in Northeast Asia, the 2023 Camp David summit aims to solidify a united front between the United States, Japan, and South Korea to address regional challenges posed by China and North Korea. **SHANTANU ROY-CHAUDHURY** and **BENJAMIN HO** examine the factors that have facilitated the rapprochement between Japan and South Korea and how renewed ties between the two are important to address the contemporary geopolitical shifts in the region.*

COMMENTARY

On 18 August 2023, US President Joe Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol in a significant and symbolic show of unity against the backdrop of geopolitical complexities in Northeast Asia. This trilateral meeting at Camp David, a historic location that brought the Egyptians and Israelis together in 1978, reaffirmed Japan and South Korea's commitment to the US-led security architecture in Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. Although leaders from the three countries have previously met on the sidelines of other meetings, this was the first standalone summit. The trilateral meeting encapsulates anxiety about China's regional and global intentions and North Korea's increasing belligerence. This was highlighted by their commitment to consult on "responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats...."



US President Joe Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol for a trilateral meeting at Camp David, reaffirming US commitment to the security of the two countries in a symbolic show of unity against the backdrop of geopolitical complexities in Northeast Asia.

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

China's assertiveness has resulted in East Asian countries actively seeking to balance its influence, a shift in past policies, and exacerbated US-China tensions. Japan and South Korea have also inferred that the situation in the Taiwan Strait is linked to their own security amidst increasing Chinese military posturing. Japan's 2022 National Security Strategy, for the first time, included a section on Taiwan which [states](#) that "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is an indispensable element for the security and prosperity of the international community". Separately, South Korea's president, during an interview with Reuters, [said](#) the Taiwan issue was a global issue and likened it to the North Korean issue.

Furthermore, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its strategic cooperation with China have led to joint military exercises close to both Japanese and South Korean borders, adding to the challenges necessitating closer cooperation. China also supports the North Korean regime, which was the primary driver for collaboration and intelligence sharing between Tokyo and Seoul. In July 2023, Pyongyang hosted delegations from Beijing and Moscow. Its leader, Kim Jong Un, also [travelled](#) to Russia in September. Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks weapons for his war in Ukraine and the North Koreans require advanced technology for satellites and nuclear-powered submarines. In this context, China's foreign policy and military activities in the region have led Japan and South Korea, historic adversaries, to come together to contend with their neighbour.

Although the United States has previously advocated stronger trilateral cooperation, it appears that the current regional security environment, the changing threat perceptions, and the willingness of the Japanese and South Korean leaders have necessitated the trilateral summit in 2023. Central to this is China and its increasingly aggressive foreign policy and the polarisation of global politics.

The Trilateral Meeting

The three countries [unveiled](#) the "Camp David Principles" where they agreed to coordinate further on security and economic issues and have annual trilateral meetings. The leaders agreed to establish a hotline to consult on regional threats and

challenges, hold annual military exercises, and strengthen information sharing on North Korea's missile activities. On the economic and technology front, they agreed to work on development finance around the world, create an early warning system for supply chain issues, and work on cancer research and artificial intelligence.

It was revealed that the purpose of the trilateral security cooperation "is and will remain to promote and enhance peace and stability throughout the region." The joint statement also directly called out China for its "aggressive and dangerous behaviour" in the South China Sea. Additionally, Taiwan was included in the statement as the three parties reaffirmed that "peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community."

Rapprochement Between Japan and South Korea

Of noteworthy importance are Japan and South Korea agreeing to the high-level meeting, given their complicated history with Japan's brutal colonisation of the Korean peninsula. Efforts to bring the two countries closer together have not always been easy and have been hindered in the past by domestic politics and colonial history. The 2018 South Korean Supreme Court decision, for example, which stated that Japanese companies must compensate Korean victims of forced labour, was a blow to bilateral relations and threatened their security cooperation. Hence, despite common geopolitical and security challenges, strained bilateral relations resulting from unsettled history conventionally hindered further cooperation.

However, earlier in March 2023, the leaders of the two countries held their first bilateral summit in 12 years. The summit-level trilateral was the culmination of several events and diplomatic activities that brought Japan and South Korea together, along with over 40 meetings held between the three countries over the past year. The two Northeast Asian leaders also met four times in as many months. While the United States played an imperative role in this rapprochement, credit is due to the leaders of Japan and South Korea, especially President Yoon who has been moving forward with rapprochement with Japan from the start of his presidency. With growing realism, sentimentality and idealism over their countries' historic bilateral relations appear to have taken a back seat.

Apart from personal willingness of the leaders towards rapprochement, external factors and regional challenges posed by China and North Korea's actions, along with shuttle diplomacy by the Americans, undoubtedly helped overcome differences. Growing concerns about China and North Korea appear to have bridged the gap between Japan and South Korea. This could also be due to changes in Japan and South Korea's threat perceptions over the past few years. Initially reluctant towards bilateral military cooperation, Tokyo and Seoul have since reconsidered the importance of data sharing and military intelligence in light of North Korea's bellicosity. If institutionalised, this trilateral meeting will highlight the importance of the two countries moving beyond historical disputes to contend with contemporary issues and focus on shared strategic interests.

Separately, the United States has defence and security arrangements with both countries and stations troops on both their territories. For the United States, this trilateral meeting is a significant addition to its arsenal in meeting the "China

challenge”, which includes the Quad (the United States, Australia, India, Japan) and AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States) groupings and its recent access to four new bases in the Philippines – close to Taiwan and in the South China Sea. The trilateral also further binds US commitment to the security of the two countries, as a safeguard against unfavourable developments in American domestic politics.

China’s Response

Given the trilateral’s underlying focus on China, Beijing has followed developments closely and responses have been in line with other US activities in the region – accusations of meddling in internal affairs and sowing discord among China and its neighbours. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin [stated](#) that China was against “the cobbling together of various small circles” and “opposes practices that exacerbate confrontation and jeopardise the strategic security of other countries”. He added that China has made demarches to the relevant parties. Viewing this as another measure to encircle and contain China, Beijing’s assertiveness is unlikely to abate. Unsurprisingly, there have been several articles on the trilateral in the Chinese state-run media platform *Global Times*, written in English and primed for an international audience. They [accuse](#) the United States of building a “mini-NATO” in the region and [warn](#) Japan and South Korea of leading Northeast Asia into a “profound security trap”. Additionally, South Korea has been called upon to reevaluate its position in joining Japan and the United States who have “ulterior motives”.

Furthermore, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had asked Japan and South Korea to regroup and restart cooperation with China, calling for their own trilateral meetings to resume. Such a meeting was last held in December 2019. Japan’s foreign minister, Yoshimasa Hayashi, and his South Korean counterpart, Park Jin, have recently confirmed that high-level trilateral talks between the three countries would resume. Despite souring relations, this Northeast Asian trilateral is imperative for regional peace and cooperation. However, Beijing’s diplomatic and military actions are unlikely to assuage Tokyo and Seoul’s apprehensions. China is also likely to counter the US-led trilateral with its own diplomatic outreaches, driving a wedge where possible.

Ultimately, China and North Korea’s aggressiveness has been the lynchpin in bringing Japan and South Korea closer together. Nevertheless, while external challenges from Beijing and Pyongyang are likely to remain, success is dependent on the rapprochement transcending lingering historical issues and domestic politics in the two Northeast Asian countries. Given how important Northeast Asia is to the Indo-Pacific, this development already signals a shift in geopolitical dynamics in the region and is symbolic of the myriad challenges that require new avenues of cooperation.

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